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In Providence, truancy put to judgment



Truancy Court magistrate Angela Buccellato applauds Hope High School students who achieve perfect attendance.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/TOM LANDERS

Court housed in high school aims to curb absenteeism

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PROVIDENCE — Some days his alarm clock works. Other days, it doesn't. That, says the popular ninth-grader at Hope High School, is why he has been getting to school late.

Family Truancy Court magistrate Angela Buccellato turns to the boy's parents to solve the mystery of the malfunctioning alarm clock.

"To my knowledge, it wasn't broken," his mother says, contradicting her son. She looks embarrassed; her husband, uncomfortable.

Buccellato looks at the boy. The outspoken teen is momentarily stunned into silence.

Verdict: The alarm clock excuse isn't working.

Here at Rhode Island's first truancy court, held weekly at Hope High School on Providence's East Side, school officials and parents are

coming together in a bid to end absenteeism — and prevent the problems it can signal. Truancy is a major problem in the Providence schools, where approximately 22 percent of high school students are absent every day. That figure prompted the school to institute the court in June.

"If you look at the files of juvenile delinquents, 90 percent of them were truant," Buccellato said.

In a converted classroom that looks very much like a real courtroom, ninth-graders accompanied by parents or other relatives come before Buccellato to explain why they've missed school.

Court is in session every Tuesday morning during the school year. Teachers are called in to give progress reports, and cases are referred to counselors or social workers. Only in extreme cases does the court impose a fine of \$50 per unexcused absence.

The idea for the court was hatched when Hope High School Principal Harry Potter read

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/TOM LANDERS

Principal Harry Potter observing the truancy court at Hope High School in session.

Putting truancy to judgment

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about a truancy program created by Philadelphia Family Court Chief Judge Paul Panepinto. After traveling to Philadelphia for a closer look at the program — which started with 40 schools two years ago and now includes all 259 schools in that city — Potter approached Providence Family Court Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah Jr.. Nearly two-thirds of the cases in Philadelphia ended with the students going back to school, Panepinto said.

Administrators report similar results at Hope High School. Of the 15 teenagers — all of whom had missed 30 days or more of school — seen in June, 14 have had perfect attendance records this year, Jeremiah said. (Missing more than 40 days of school a year usually results in students having to repeat a grade.)

Other Rhode Island towns with high truancy rates plan to start truancy courts in their middle schools soon. Jeremiah has worked with US Senator Lincoln Chafee to secure \$1.9 million a year in federal funding for each of the next three years, to help pay for additional social services.

Bucci said it is important to do something about truancy in middle school. Intervening in high school is thought to be too late. The Hope High program deals with ninth-graders, most of whom are still under 16, the age at which students are no longer required to attend school. But Potter, who has identified 61 truants over 16, plans to meet with their parents about starting programs to help them get back on track.

The key to truancy court is the constant supervision of each child, Potter said.

During Tuesday's session, School Department social worker Mary Archibald offered to drive a student to his probation officer, and set up a home visit with a student whose phone was disconnected.

nected.

Students average about 20 minutes in Truancy Court and are provided with follow-up services that range from daily phone calls from a social worker to being escorted to tutoring lessons.

The court doesn't aim to punish students, Jeremiah said. Instead, after Bucci announces that a student has a perfect attendance record, the court applauds.

"Attendance, dropout, and achievement are all interrelated," said Providence School Superintendent Diana Lam. "You don't do well in one of these, they all impact each other."

And, Archibald said, family and social problems such as poverty need to be dealt with hand-in-hand with any trouble a student is having in school.

Last week, a ninth-grader stood in front of Bucci, her large orange T-shirt slipping off her left shoulder. Why had she missed school? She had a doctor's appointment one day, a fever another. She couldn't call the school because the phone was disconnected. Her mother, who has inoperable brain tumors, couldn't come to court. Her grandfather, who lives with the family, is disabled and couldn't make it either. Her family is being evicted.

She has missed four days of school since her appearance before Bucci, in September, and missed a scheduled appearance last week. Bucci tells her, "On Sept. 12, you said, 'You can count on me; I'm not going to miss any classes.' What happened?"

The girl says she has been sick lately. And on the day she was supposed to be in court, she says, "nobody even woke me up."

Yet the student keeps herself busy with the academic decathlon, the school paper, and taekwon do after school — too busy, she says, to receive counseling.

"I'm still doing great," she tells Bucci. "I don't want to praise myself. I believe I'm going to be on

the honor roll this year."

But Bucci suggests that she could use some help.

"Let's get you some counseling so you feel better about your home life," she says. "It sounds like your shoulders must be heavy with a lot of stuff now. Let's see how we can ease your burden."

Truancy isn't always about broken families. Sometimes, it's just broken alarm clocks.

At the first session, one student claimed he couldn't wake up in the morning because he didn't own an alarm clock. The judge took the clock off his desk and handed it to the student.

"Now you have no excuse," Jeremiah told him.

Another student — who was absent 82 days last year — goes clubbing with friends or chats on the phone late into the night.

"Did your mother put an ice cube down your back like I told her?" jokes Bucci, imposing a curfew of 8 p.m. on weekdays and midnight on Fridays and Saturdays.

This week, Rhode Island hosted a truancy summit that brought together 300 mayors, school superintendents, police chiefs, and state government directors from across the country.

Potter said he hopes that by talking with other schools about how to deal with truancy, he can better address the issue at Hope High School.

Over the summer, he examined the records of more than 400 incoming ninth-graders, and identified 183 who had skipped more than 20 days of middle school. Thirty-five of them have already missed up to 12 days of school this year and will appear in court in the next few weeks.

Potter said he is determined that these students will not slip through the cracks to become dropouts or criminals. Using a carrot-and-stick approach is the solution, he said. "A child who's not here fails."